

Lincoln-Douglas Debate at Freeport

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Although the 1858 race for the U. S. senate seat between Democratic incumbent Stephen A. Douglas and Republican Abraham Lincoln eventually became a war of words, ideas, and strategy, it did not begin that way. Lincoln was a shrewd and charismatic public speaker and could easily sway an audience, but he was not as well known as Senator Douglas and had great difficulty attracting crowds. So a day or so after Douglas spoke in a town, Lincoln would speak there as well, taking advantage of the large audience Douglas had attracted. Eventually, the Republicans challenged Douglas to a series of seven debates during which both men took turns speaking and questioning each other on a particular day. Refusing to participate would have hurt Douglas' campaign, so he agreed to appear, and thus the debates were scheduled.

The Freeport debate was the second of seven between Lincoln and Douglas. It occurred on August 27 in Freeport, a town in northwestern Illinois. The main topic of the debate was slavery, and the key issue was whether slavery should exist in the western territories of the United States.

Lincoln opposed slavery and argued vehemently that it should not expand into the territories. Douglas, on the other hand, supported the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, a law lifting the ban on slavery in territories north of 36° 30'. He claimed that popular sovereignty allowed a state to decide whether or not slavery was legal within its boundaries. Douglas believed that civil war would be the only outcome if the government tried to restrict slavery, and civil war was something that the senator greatly

feared. He stated emphatically that he would not support any course of action that might cause a split in the Union.

Lincoln fiercely challenged Douglas at Freeport, Illinois, on the topic of slavery in the territories. He asked Douglas whether settlers could prohibit slavery before a territory became a state. Douglas replied that under the doctrine of popular sovereignty, they could. Elaborating, Douglas explained that if settlers did not establish a slave code, no one could legally bring slaves into the area. This response came to be known as the Freeport Doctrine and lost Douglas a great deal of popularity in Southern slaveholding states where voters did not want restrictions of any sort placed on slavery.

Douglas, nevertheless, defeated Lincoln in the senatorial race, winning 54 to 46 when the Illinois state legislature voted. Many newspapers covered the Lincoln-Douglas Debates; therefore, people throughout the country knew what these men were thinking. Since Democratic politicians relied heavily on Southern support, Douglas' Freeport Doctrine cost him the presidency when he ran against Lincoln two years later.

In conclusion, both Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas had many loyal supporters. The seven debates that took place between them in 1858 showcased their political platforms. Despite his charisma, Douglas was unable to convince the public that popular sovereignty and the Freeport Doctrine would resolve tensions associated with the expansion of slavery into the territories. Lincoln used this to his advantage, and although Douglas was able to win the senatorial campaign, Lincoln won the presidency in 1860.

[From Gerald M. Capers, *Stephen A. Douglas*; "Lincoln-Douglas Debates."

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(Nov. 27, 2007); Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln*; Saul Sigelschiffer, *The American Conscience*; and Michael Ward, "Democratic Party." *Encyclopedia of American History*.]